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NAVY TIMES, Mark D. Faram

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1.) Opportunities rise as Navy workforce grows/ 11 APRIL15
 NAVY TIMES, Mark D. Faram

NORFOLK, Va. — Halfway through fiscal year 2015, the Navy's enlisted workforce is in the best shape since the last drawdown.

It's a good time to be a sailor, with bright promotion opportunities and a growing workforce, the personnel brass say.

"We're in a steady state now with our end strength predictions for the future," said Vice Adm. Bill Moran, the chief of naval personnel. "The Navy's going to go up in total numbers over the next five years."

Fleet manning numbers are up and officials plan to cut the ribbon later this year on a new detailing system that will boost numbers and better match sailors to the skills needed in their next job.

Along the way, Moran wants sailors to get less initial training up front and more advanced training throughout their fleet tours and careers.

Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy (AW/NAC) Mike Stevens says he's seen a shift lately in sailors' attitudes — from the questions they ask and what they're not asking during his fleet visits.

"It's not always what you hear, but what you don't hear," Stevens told Navy Times in an April 1 interview here. "What I didn't hear on this trip was a lot of complaints — there were very few but I didn't hear much of any discussion about manning or about pay and benefits.

"It leads me to believe that, by and large, sailors are happy and content with their quality of life and quality of service," he said. "But you can't take that for granted."

Manning numbers up

What Moran called a "steady state" of manpower became clearer with the release of the 2016 budget request, which laid out the plan to grow the force over the rest of the decade.

After 10-years of drawing down to 316,000 sailors, the service sits nearly 10,000 larger at 325,563 as of mid-April, and its expected to grow to nearly 330,000 by fiscal year 2020.

Over three years, fleet manning has been boosted by a combination of carrots (sea duty incentives and higher pays) and sticks (ending shore duty earlier for those with critical skills). The number of open fleet jobs has dropped from 17,000 three years ago to 2,500 today.

Moran credits his predecessor, retired Vice Adm. Scott Van Buskirk, with getting the ball rolling by identifying the gaps and laying out the strategy to fill them, a plan in the works for years.

At the end of 2014, the fleet overall had 98 percent of its billets filled with a sailor — and 92 percent of those billets had a sailor whose Navy Enlisted Classification and paygrade matched those required by their job.

Moran is set to unveil a new detailing system this fall that that aims to better fit sailors and their skills to open jobs in the fleet.

Billet-based detailing, as it's called, is how business has been done in the officer ranks for years. Now, working with fleet manning officials, type commanders and individual commands, they've defined every billet in the fleet to a greater extent than before.

"Once we get this going later this year, it will improve command readiness by sending them the best sailor for the job," Moran said April 2, while he was visiting Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida. "It will also improve the quality of life and work for the sailor, as they'll be a better fit for the billet they're heading for."

Recruiting and retention

The Navy has an annual turnover of 35,000 sailors who are retiring or getting out and it recruits the same number on the other end to fill their shoes.

But as the service looks to grow over the next five years, Moran doesn't plan to recruit more sailors; he wants to retain more top sailors to fill the new billets on the way.

"I want to do that by retaining more high-quality people," Moran said, "ratcheting up our retention numbers where we need to, in the right areas, while not having to bring in more raw material on the front end and have to train them from scratch."

Manpower officials will do that, he says, by keeping closer tabs on re-up bonuses, which in recent years have only had semi-annual adjustments for skills and payout levels.

"We're trying to do it every six months now because we're a little bit more aware of the trends in the critical skills we need," he said. "It's a bit more work for my staff, but it's more effective in ensuring we keep the right people in the right numbers before it starts to decline to a point it's difficult to recover from."

After years in which a slow economy drove more high-quality recruits to the Navy's door, Moran says officials are now seeing a slight downward trend in numbers and quality of recruits.

"We're meeting goals later in the month, each month," he said. "It's kind of a trend, and some months are better than others, but overall it's getting harder to for our recruiting force to meet our goals with the quality we've put forward."

Advancement

Every sailor wants to be able to count on advancement opportunities throughout his or her career. And like retention levels, Moran says good advancement opportunities across the board is a byproduct of increasing manpower levels.

"Well, certainly this year, more of the same," he said. "Good opportunity, above the 10-year average, is a pretty good metric for us right now."

And in fleet visits, he told sailors they can count on favorable a good level of advancement for the next few cycles.

"I'm not a fan of large swings in advancement, either in the aggregate or in individual ratings," Moran said. "As long as there's a good flow, I'd rather err on the conservative side and save more advancement for the next cycle."

The Navy reworked the Command Advancement Program last year, limiting these spot advancements by commanding officers to a three-month season each year.

This summer will be the first test of these new CAP seasons, but Moran says that knowing who the COs pick up front will make it easier for manpower planners to sort out quotas for those seeking to advance each test cycle.

2.) CNP says 'NKO stinks,' aims to design new training hub/ 14 APRIL 15
NAVY TIMES, Meghann Myers

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. — Navy Knowledge Online, the portal sailors use for everything from e-learning to professional development resources, is a pain, the Navy's personnel boss said Tuesday, and his office is in the early stages of coming up with an alternative.

"NKO stinks," Vice Adm. Bill Moran told attendees at the annual Sea Air Space Exposition outside Washington, D.C. "I'm not going to sugarcoat it. It's too slow. It's burdensome."

Revamping NKO is one step in Moran's push to overhaul the Navy's information technology infrastructure, so training and education resources are more available and easier to access fleetwide, especially at sea.

"We need to move completely off that system, but we need to capture it in a different way," he said.

Tell us: Improving NKO

One of the upgrades needed, he said, is to make it easier to access for sailors at sea, who are competing for a very limited amount of ship-based Internet bandwidth.

The other is a cosmetic face lift.

Digital Show Daily: Complete coverage from the Navy League Sea-Air-Space Exposition

"The more I talk to sailors, the more we recognize the frustrations of young men and women going through the system, not having a technology system that looks something like what they've grown up with the past 10 years," he said.

Moran's office wants it to look like a modern system — he highlighted the Marine Corp's Marine Online system— with some upgrades to make it a little "smarter."

"Why can't I swipe my ID card when I go on NKO, and it knows who I am and it knows the last time I logged on?" he said.

So does this mean the impending doom of NKO?

"That's something I'd love to do, but right now we need to fix the [information technology] piece before we would get rid of NKO, or improve NKO so it's got the bandwidth and the capability to do what we really need it to do," Moran said.

The Chief of Naval Operations Rapid Innovation Cell is one place that might incubate ideas for an NKO upgrade, but CNP's office is also looking to the fleet for suggestions.

"I've asked my team to put aside their egos and to give it to fleet lieutenants and first class petty officers," he said. "Those guys know how to do it. That collaboration is going on right now."

3.) CNO: Virtual reality training should be for all hands/ 14 APRIL 15
NAVY TIMES, David Larter

The Navy's top officer said it's time to bring simulators and virtual reality training to the whole fleet by bringing it to the waterfront.

While simulation has long been a mainstay of aviation training and more recently the littoral combat ship, Adm. Jon Greenert said Monday that virtual reality training can benefit sailors in every rate.

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"The fidelity of virtual reality today is such that our folks can use touch screens to immerse in anything from starting a diesel engine, to launching a torpedo to working on an aircraft," Greenert said during a panel discussion at the 2015 Sea-Air-Space Expo.

Greenert said the Navy should move training closer to the waterfront so units can have access to the immersive trainers as they need them, and that this would save money over the traditional schoolhouse and lab learning model.

"We can save enormous time and money in this [area]," he said. "The technology we're talking about costs tens of thousands of dollars. Building a new laboratory will cost you millions of dollars."

The simulators would be housed in conex boxes or trailers, with technology that is adaptable for any number of training scenarios.

"You go in … and you're surrounded by screens and you are going to learn to start a gas turbine engine. Then you can shift over, and you are in a sonar room. You can shift over again, and you are working on a helicopter engine.

"My vision ... is to put those closer to the waterfront so that units from all three communities can gather and use these things, and get out of what is now more of a stovepipe approach to the training."

Greenert said using virtual reality is how millennials learn best.

"The millennials of today can grasp things very quickly when they are immersed in it rather than book learning," he said.

Virtual reality training is used extensively in the aviation world, especially with the F-35. But it is also being used for training LCS sailors and for the Virginia-class submarine.

Bringing the concept to the rest of the fleet isn't just a pipe dream, said one Navy official, who spoke on background to discuss internal deliberations. The virtual training labs are part of Chief of Naval Personnel Vice Adm. Bill Moran's push to change the way training works in the fleet, with less up front in the school house and more training done in the fleet.

4.) Carter: Toss vintage personnel systems/ 12 APRIL 15
MILITARY TIMES, Andrew Tilghman

Defense Secretary Ash Carter says the military should build an internal social media platform that would transform the way jobs are assigned and how troops are evaluated.

The idea is emerging from corporate America, where some large organizations are spending millions of dollars to create their own Facebook-style systems that can have far-reaching effects on the way they do business every day.

Since taking over the Pentagon's top job in February, Carter has repeatedly cited the professional networking site LinkedIn as an example of what the military needs for better internal management.

"That's an example of a kind of technology that you can use, and we can use, to improve performance evaluations; to make sure that onward assignments, next assignments, that you have the greatest visibility into ... how you find a next assignment that fits you — your skills, your family, your future and your goals in life. We need to be competitive in that way," Carter told a group of soldiers during a recent visit to Fort Drum, New York.

Carter's push for new technology in part reflects a growing anxiety about recruiting and retaining the best and brightest among today's so-called millennial generation.

Many of today's young recruits join the military to gain technological expertise. Yet after boot camp, they are often dumbfounded by the gap between the cutting-edge technology used in war-fighting operations and the antiquated, paper-based systems that the military uses for managing its own personnel.

A wholesale upgrade of military personnel systems could have many cultural implications not least because automating some aspects of manpower management may reduce the military's traditional reliance on personal connections and relationships.

"It's hard to justify making a decision of picking someone because it's an old buddy or a friend when you have a system that is clearly showing you that there are one, two or three people who are much better suited," said Luke Marson, a technology consultant who helped Norway's armed forces create a new personnel management system last year.

"There are certain areas where a system is going to help pick the pick the right candidate over a known candidate," said Marson, a human resources technology expert with Hula Partners.

No easy task

Creating a system like what Carter describes would be a massive undertaking; by some accounts, the current system is a total mess. Military personnel offices rely on dozens of aging, independently developed computer systems that cannot be easily merged or searched collectively.

For example, the details of a service member's past assignments are kept in a database that may be separate from the details about the member's training and education. Details on a member's deployment history is stovepiped somewhere else, and all of those are separate from any health issues or family situations that might affect an individual's needs or preferences for future job assignments. In addition, letters of reprimand and other disciplinary measures often are not included in permanent personnel files.

For military leaders, a technological upgrade would offer several benefits. The current retention system is based on raw numbers. But big-data analysis would create new visibility on the quality of who stays and who leaves the military, giving leaders new insight into the talents and skills of troops who are retained — or lost.

Data in an individual's file might include pre-military information such as school grade-point averages or aptitude test scores. That might be combined with performance metrics from military training programs along with data from fitness reports or evaluations.

Woven together with real-time information about re-enlistments and duty assignments, that data would provide senior leaders with a "dashboard" offering much clearer and more complete visibility on the health of the force and current retention trends.

Such sweeping changes are a long way off. The Pentagon's personnel directorate has created "working groups" to tackle the nuts-and-bolts issues underlying Carter's proposals.

Yet the Defense Department's track record regarding information technology is spotty.

For example, DoD is still unable to seamlessly share basic medical information with the Veterans Affairs Department. And on March 8, the DoD inspector general reported that the department has not updated its long-term information technology plan since 2006, despite the creation of U.S. Cyber Command in 2009.

Still, the basic premise is gaining some traction. The Navy recently issued a three-page "enterprise challenge statement" intended to give technology companies a general description of what kind of system the Navy is looking for, one that can:

•Consolidate information from the "more than 40 databases" now in use by the Navy personnel system.

•Have a mobile app for smartphones.

•Provide real-time analytic reports.

•Help training instructors identify trends and weaknesses.

•Improve evaluation of senior leaders by analyzing the retention and career success of the troops under their command.

•Help target stress-reduction and morale improvement efforts by analyzing "individual, operational, health, environmental and other characteristic data ... to predict when and where to apply resources."

The goal of the future system is to compile and track 4,000 to 6,000 pieces of data on each sailor, a Navy official said.

"We are doing a lot of work right now to try to upgrade our 'weapons system for people,' our information technology, to get a better site picture of our workforce," said Vice Adm. Bill Moran, chief of naval personnel.

Constructing a large-scale personnel data system will cost millions of dollars. Navy leaders hope to include significant funding in the fiscal 2017 budget request that is under development, a Navy official said.

Sharing information

The idea of a dedicated military social media site connecting troops around the world has inspired some unofficial efforts. The biggest, Rallypoint.com, is a social networking site that claims one in every eight active-duty troops as members. It was founded three years ago by veterans at Harvard Business School who saw an opportunity in the Defense Department's antiquated systems.

"The number one complaint of everyone I've ever known in the military is about the human resources and personnel system," Yinon Weiss, Rallypoint's CEO and a former Army Special Forces officer, said in an interview.

Rallypoint provides troops with important official information. For example, the site tracks and publishes when military jobs will become available with a far longer lead time than the military's official system.

"The military will not tag a position as open until a few months before it's vacated," Weiss said. "But the individual person knows two years before when his or her orders are up. We give that information to our members so they can see what jobs are coming available in the future."

Rallypoint also sends out alerts when new members join a new unit.

"We'll send an email notification and say, 'Hey, check out who is coming to your unit in 30 days.' And people can go see what their experience is, when they deployed, who their connections are, what skills they have," Weiss said.

"Those are all things that the military has acknowledged would be helpful and has tried. But being social and being consumer-centric is just not in the DNA of the military."

The end of evals and fitreps?

Creating a social media-style network could change the way individuals are evaluated or even lead to the end of the traditional system fitness reports and bureaucratic performance reviews.

Michael Moon, who researches social media's use for human resources for the Aberdeen Group in Boston, said some companies no longer bother with evaluations from a single manager but instead rely on "cloud-sourced feedback on an individual."

Companies are creating ways for all employees to be constantly evaluating and providing feedback on each other, potentially combining input from supervisors, peers and underlings.

"If there is a performance issue that needs to be corrected, you want that employee to know about it right away, not six months later or a year later," Moon said in an interview. "Having that feedback right away helps the employee know that they are on the right track."

Some companies' networks use searchable hashtag-style identifiers to tag individuals with particular skills and encourage workers to solve problems collaboratively by searching out colleagues with subject matter expertise.

For example, that might allow helicopter mechanics who are facing a particular problem to share information with their counterparts in other squadrons who might work with the same equipment but be assigned to a different unit on a different continent.

Leaders can also more directly engage with their organization. For example, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, periodically conducts a "Facebook town hall" where he responds to questions posed by service members.

In some companies, that kind of communication occurs routinely at every level of management, Moon said.

"It can create an air of trust in leadership. It creates a certain bond when leaders are engaging in conversations and asking questions and responding. It makes them more human and increases the sense of commitment to the organization."

A communications system can create the sensation that the organization is less hierarchical and flatter because there is more than just top-down communications.

"The organization can appear to become flatter, but it isn't necessarily flatter. It's still hierarchical, but there is more communication happening laterally and diagonally."

"I'd say we could start seeing this in the fleet in the next two or three years," the official said.

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